

Qatar and its Neighbors: Disputes and Possible Implications

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Qatar's Neighbors Break Relations, Impose Sanctions

On June 5, the governments of [Saudi Arabia](#), the [United Arab Emirates \(UAE\)](#), [Bahrain](#), and Egypt severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, moved to expel Qatari diplomats, recalled their ambassadors from the Qatari capital, Doha, and imposed limits on the entry and transit of Qatari nationals and vessels in their territories, waters, and airspace. Qataris currently in these countries were given 14 days to leave.

[Qatar's Foreign Ministry](#) expressed “deep regret” at these steps, calling them “unjustified” and an attempt to impose “guardianship” and thus violate Qatari sovereignty. The sanction announcements rippled through energy and financial markets and [caused](#) fears of food and import shortages in Qatar during observance of Ramadan.

The sanctioning governments have a range of grievances with Qatar's government, including concerns about Qatari support for nonstate actors such as the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), and what they regard as Qatari attempts to meddle in other Arab states' internal affairs. Official Saudi and Emirati statements also cite concerns about Qatar's stance toward Iran, with which Qatar maintains relations and shares lucrative [natural gas](#) reserves. Oman and Kuwait have closer ties to Iran than does Qatar and did not join the Saudi-led move. Several regional countries, including Iran, have [called for](#) dialogue to resolve the dispute. After the State Department [called for](#) quicker action to resolve the crisis on June 20, the concerned countries [presented](#) a list of specific demands to Qatar on June 22. Kuwait continues to mediate the dispute.

The long-standing nature of the concerns enumerated by the governments who have imposed the sanctions has left international observers speculating about the timing of their imposition and possible motives for action now. Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al Thani participated in the May 2017 U.S.-Gulf summit and [met with President Donald Trump](#). In the wake of the summit, [tensions escalated rapidly](#) amid claims and counterclaims of clandestine media and influence campaigns, Internet hacking, and inflammatory official statements.

Context of the Dispute

Since a 1995 leadership change, Qatar has used its ample financial resources to implement a foreign policy characterized by engagement with a wide range of regional actors and frequently in contradiction to the policies of Saudi Arabia and other members of the GCC. As noted, Qatar has embraced Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups, arguing that they represent a moderate political Islamist movement that can

foster regional stability. Qatar has engaged Israeli officials and hosted leaders of the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, and maintained ties to Iran even while maintaining defense cooperation with the United States that is largely directed at containing Iran.

Qatar, like some of the other GCC states, has sought to shape the outcome of regional uprisings since 2011, in some cases using its own military forces, such as in Libya. In Syria, Qatar has joined other GCC states in assisting groups opposed to President Bashar Al Asad, but some of the Syrian groups Qatar has helped have been [accused of having ties to Al Qaeda](#). In March 2014, these and related differences—including over the 2013 military overthrow of an elected Muslim Brotherhood-linked President of Egypt—widened to the point where Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha. [The Ambassadors returned in November 2014](#) in exchange for mutual pledges not to interfere in each other's affairs, but the underlying policy differences remained.

Potential Implications for the United States

The rift raises questions for U.S. security operations in the region, including efforts to secure the Persian Gulf region and to combat the Islamic State organization. [U.S.-Qatar relations](#) are multifaceted and it seems unlikely that bilateral military ties will be immediately disrupted by the dispute. Nevertheless, U.S. operations in the region benefit from fluid interrelationships among GCC defense facilities, which could be complicated or interrupted by the measures against Qatar. To date, the U.S. Department of Defense has not identified any resulting changes to U.S. or coalition military operations.

The United States and Qatar signed a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) in June 1992. It was renewed for 10 years, reportedly with some modifications, in December 2013. The text of the pact is classified, but it [reportedly addressed U.S. military access](#) to Qatari military facilities, prepositioning of U.S. military equipment, and training of Qatar's military force of about 12,000.

Approximately [10,000 U.S. troops are currently deployed at the various facilities in Qatar](#) and participate in various U.S. operations, including Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) against the Islamic State organization. Most are U.S. [Air Force](#) personnel based at the Al Udeid air base southwest of Doha, which hosts the forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), its Air Component Commander, and its [Combined Air Operations Center](#). Al Udeid has been enhanced with Qatari and about \$450 million in U.S. military construction funding since 2003. The U.S. Army component of CENTCOM [prepositions material at Camp As Sayliyah](#).

Congress reviews [ongoing sales of U.S. defense articles and services](#) to Qatar and the other GCC countries. On June 26, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Bob Corker [informed](#) the State Department that he would withhold informal clearances on sales of lethal military equipment to the GCC until the committee is provided with “a better understanding of the path to resolve the current dispute and reunify the GCC.”

To date, Qatar's neighbors have not signaled an intent to prohibit the transit of U.S.-flagged aircraft and vessels to Qatar through adjacent airspace or waters, including civilian airlines that are partnered with Qatar Airways, which has suspended flights to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain in response to reciprocal flight bans from those countries. Transit constraints could affect [U.S. citizens, businesses](#), and universities operating in Qatar and the other parties to the dispute.

On June 5, [Secretary of State Rex Tillerson linked](#) the dispute to “a growing list of some irritants in the region,” encouraged “the parties to sit down together,” and added, “we think it is important that the GCC remain unified.” On June 6, [President Trump](#) appeared to side with the Saudi-led move and with accusations that Qatari donors are supplying funds to militant groups. However, on June 7, he [spoke with Emir Tamim](#) and “offered to help the parties resolve their differences, including through a meeting at the White House if necessary.” On June 23, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer [referred](#) to the dispute

as “a family issue” that the countries concerned “should work out.” Spicer stated that U.S. offers to facilitate dialogue are still standing.

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